

CONNER PRAIRIE

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71.2009.D&S.05105



# Indiana

## Cities & Towns

### Conner Prairie

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the  
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You are invited to make use of our snack bar and picnic area. Bring the family and spend the day.

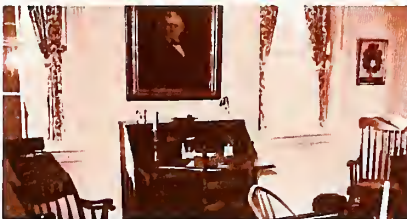
**Schedule 1966**  
 June 12 through September 5  
 Tuesday-Saturday 9 A.M.-5 P.M.  
 Sunday 1 P.M.-5 P.M.  
 Closed Mondays

For tours before June 12 or after Labor Day,  
 write or call for an appointment.  
 Phone — 773-3633  
 If No Answer — 846-0737

William Conner was a leader in two phases of Indiana's history. He settled along the White River in central Indiana in 1800; the only white man in the area. He established a post where he traded with the Indians, exchanging white man's goods for beaver and other animal hides. He married Mekinges, daughter of Chief Anderson, and they had six children. He served as a scout and interpreter for General William Henry Harrison and participated in the signing of many Indian treaties.

By 1820 several white families had moved into the area. The commissioners, meeting that year in Conner's cabin, decided to move the state capital to the present site of Indianapolis. In the same year the Indians in accord with the treaty, moved westward and Mekinges and the six children went along. Later that year Conner married Elizabeth Chapman and settled down as a businessman among the whites. He became a leading figure in business and in government in Hamilton County and the State Legislature. He helped to found the cities of Noblesville and Alexandria.

*The Conner Prairie Settlement was restored to its present condition by Mr. Eli Lilly of Indianapolis who acquired the property in 1930 and, after opening it to the public on a limited basis, presented it to Earlham College in 1964 to be operated as a permanent historical museum.*



Historic Conner Prairie is located on old Indiana 37 (37A) about four miles south of Noblesville and only a half hour's drive from Monument Circle in Indianapolis. It is easily accessible not only to Indianapolis, but is centrally located in the state and only a few miles from U.S. route 31 and Indiana routes 37, 38 and 32.



# CONNER PRAIRIE

## HISTORIC PIONEER SETTLEMENT



**Noblesville, Indiana**

**Earlham College**



# CONNER PRAIRIE MUSEUM



Conner Prairie is history come alive in central Indiana. A trip through the museum takes you through the life of one of Indiana's foremost settlers and ranges through forty of the most important and fascinating years of Indiana's history. Pleasant and well-informed guides are stationed throughout the area to provide information and assistance and to demonstrate pioneer crafts.

One of the museum's main buildings is the brick mansion built in 1823 by William Conner as a home for his second wife, Elizabeth. The home has been completely restored and refurnished and the visitor now has the impression that William and Elizabeth have just stepped out for a moment.



Supplementing the Conner home are a small group of outbuildings. These include a log spring house, a large still house, and a loom house where spinning and weaving are demonstrated.



Three log buildings have been restored to represent those in which Conner lived and worked with his first wife, Mekinges, daughter of the Indian leader, Chief Anderson. The log barn features a covered wagon and in the pioneer cabin you may watch candles being made. The trading post contains, in addition to such things as pots, pans, blankets and yard goods, the beaver and other pelts which the Indians used for barter.



The large modern dairy barn has been remodeled to provide display space for a recently excavated dugout canoe and a series of displays on the life of the frontier farmer, with antique farm implements from the Purdue Agricultural Alumni Association's gift to the museum.

## Conner Prairie Interactive History Park - Review

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN  
Published: June 21, 2011

nytimes.com



A.J. Mast for The New York Times A costumed interpreter leads visitors in a stilt-walking race at Conner Prairie Interactive History Park in Indiana. [More Photos »](#)

FISHERS, Ind. — The drama unfolding here on the outskirts of Indianapolis involves a dashing, Kentucky-born guerrilla fighter, ruthless in plunder and genteel in manners. There's a pioneer fur trader, too, a man who negotiated with the Lenape Indians to move them out of central Indiana and lost his Lenape Indian wife and children in the bargain. And let's not forget the 20th-century philanthropist who envisioned a living museum that would reflect the history of his state; his gift of that museum to a nearby college that had other priorities led to 21st-century courtroom battles and, ultimately, to the museum's recent independence. Now teams of "interpreters" and "facilitators" and costumed Indians lure more than 220,000 visitors a year to this endearingly strange place.

Here at the Conner Prairie Interactive History Park, on 850 acres of prairie land that mainly belonged, in the 1820s, to one William Conner (that fur trader and negotiator with the Indians), all of these elements come together, creating a hybrid of historical society, amusement park, 19th-century village and high-tech theater. Its history inspires it to try to tell history in a different way: not as fact but as experience.

Its most ambitious undertaking yet is "1863 Civil War Journey: Raid on Indiana," a \$4.3 million interactive show that received its premiere on June 4. The drama is staged in buildings meant to represent the town of Dupont, Ind. During the Civil War Dupont was attacked by thousands of Confederates led by John Hunt Morgan; they had been riding on horseback through Indiana, plundering and pillaging, wrecking rail lines and cutting telegraph wires. "Morgan's Raids" are the only Civil War battles that took place in Indiana.

Now they are taking place here. We are in a historical village of sorts, whose broad-timbered barns are authentic, but whose other buildings were constructed for previous interactive exhibitions. They are inhabited by costumed interpreters who treat visitors like recruits preparing to battle Morgan's marauders. We can see the effect of earlier attacks, including a smoldering ruin and the burned facade of the train depot.

Such historical "sets" exist elsewhere in the park too, including an 1836 village, Prairietown, and a Lenape Indian Camp. They require a strenuous suspension of skepticism, along with a readiness to welcome the conversation of gruff blacksmiths pumping on bellows before they hammer out authentic 19th-century-style nails.

But Conner Prairie, at least in the Civil War "journey," turns the notion of a historical village inside out. First it tries to create a continuous narrative through which visitors are led; then it rips aside the historical mask with contemporary special effects. We stand in Mayfield and Nichols Dry Goods Store as it comes under attack, for example, and we realize that aside from posters advertising vintage Roback's Stomach Bitters, the room is also stocked with sub-woofers and flat-screen video monitors through which we experience the attack and the plunder. Nearby, in a cozy home left in some disarray by bivouacked soldiers, 3-D video projections bring us accounts of a young black man who was imprisoned by the raiders and then escaped. There are touch-screen monitors in one room, offering simple video games that challenge you to stop the raiders. At the climax, you are led into a multimedia presentation about Morgan's raids and his ultimate defeat, including flashes of footage showing the militia gathering to defend the town — which playfully turns out to be the audience marching into the theater.

In the midst of all this, some aspects of historical experience begin to become vivid: we can imagine the fear the raids must have inspired, as well as the determination to defend the town. In some of the video accounts we get hints of the divisions that existed in Indiana about its Southern neighbors just over the Ohio River.

But it is also like walking through a stage set in which fragments of a play are being rehearsed; it is frustratingly unclear how everything fits together. It is important, though, to see how this approach began and how it might evolve.

Ellen M. Rosenthal, the president and chief executive of the park, explained in an interview that the goal of the park was to treat history not as something completed, but as something lived, something that grows out of people's experiences and understanding. She asserts that the most important aspect of the park may be its costumed interpreters, who are unusually well trained. There is an attentiveness to the varied ages of visitors, an attempt to engage families in multiple interactions, an eagerness to share experiences.

One of the park's theatrical successes has also been a participatory drama, "Follow the North Star," presented in April and November, in which visitors are meant to get insight into the experiences of slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad. The overall ambition, though, is not new. This park, like Henry Ford's Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Mich., and John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, began in the 1930s. Here the prime mover was Eli Lilly, grandson of the founder of Indianapolis's pharmaceutical company, and a patron of local historical institutions. In 1934 he bought the land that included the surviving 1823 house of William Conner, the early Indiana settler. Lilly restored the home and began to create a historical village that he said could "connect people with history in ways that books cannot."

But the museum did not have much opportunity to evolve beyond these ideas. Lilly, who died in 1977, gave the museum, along with an associated \$150 million endowment, to the nearby Earlham College. But improving the museum was evidently not a high priority, and finally, after much legal contention, the legacy of land and money was split. In late 2005 the museum became independent; it now has a \$91 million endowment and a budget of over \$9 million.

It has also been expanding its ambitions so that it feels like a work in progress. The problem is that for history to become lived experience, we don't just need sensations of fear and pride. We need context. We need to understand what people were concerned about, what political forces were in play, and what choices were faced. This is something that historical villages are not particularly interested in — which is why they sometimes seem almost ahistorical.

At Conner Prairie, fixing this would mean integrating traditional exposition into the show. We never really understand much about the state of the Civil War in July 1863, soon after the Battle of Gettysburg. How did the news of Gen. Robert E. Lee's failure to take the war north affect Morgan's ambitions? How did the casualties of that bloody battle in early July affect the reactions of the people of Indiana to imminent attacks a few weeks later? What was the official Confederate view? (Morgan's raid was apparently a violation of his superior's instructions.)

We shouldn't be learning from a summary booklet at the close of the exhibition that Morgan, after raiding more than 6,500 homes and shops in Ohio and Indiana, was imprisoned by the Union and daringly escaped. There is a postscript needed too, because though the show evokes the triumph of Morgan's defeat, we never learn that he became a folk hero in the South.

Setting up this broader context would require expanding the notion of interactive history, moving beyond the limits of the historical village and beyond, too, the

limits of technological sensation. That should be possible: one of the appealing things about Conner Prairie is that it treats even its own history as part of an unfolding drama with revisions yet to come.



